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Bugging Out?

[Leah Gliniewicz](#)

When it comes to the battle of the bugs, know when to hold 'em, and know when to fold 'em -- and let a professional take charge.

Most homeowners can deal with an ant or cockroach situation themselves if they are willing to spend the time, says William Kern, assistant extension scientist for the University of Florida and the Florida Cooperative extension service in Largo, Fla. Free information is available from the local cooperative extension service listed in the phone book.

Baiting -- putting out chemicals that bugs take back to the nest -- can be an inexpensive way to get rid of social insects such as ants. It can cost less than \$50.

Who ya going to call?

So when is it time to call an expert? When the problem is termites.

Termites are "not a do-it-yourself home project. If you do it wrong, your house is going to get eaten," says Richard Abrams, an attorney with Heckler, Frabizzio and Durstein in Wilmington, Del.

Make sure the company you're dealing with knows what it's doing, or it could cost you your house.

Just ask Kerry Oneschuck of Seaford, Del. She lost the \$175,000 home that she inherited from her father.

"After nine years of treatment, I still had live termites in the house. They had not properly treated the house. They had not killed the termites," Oneschuck says. Termite tunnels had reached the roof. "The stairs going down to the basement were basically gone ... The termites were literally eating the house up."

She was forced to sell the uninhabitable house for the price of the land it was standing on. That saved her demolition costs.

"This was the American dream that was going. Mom and dad designed that house, built that house for their retirement and it's gone," she says.

Things to find out before hiring a pest control company

What is the company's track record?

Ask to see proof of insurance.

Is the company licensed?

Is it affiliated with a professional pest control association?

Does it stand behind its work? What is its guarantee?

Is it willing to discuss the proposed treatment?

Source: [National Pest Management Association Inc.](#)

See no evil

"I think one of the most vulnerable groups is new homeowners," Abrams says.

In most states, especially termite-prone areas, the seller or buyer is required to obtain a wood-destroying insect report. Abrams says he's often seen reports that come from the same company that treats the homes. That conflict of interest creates problems for the new homeowner who may end up finding termites after the purchase.

"You want an objective, independent opinion. If people would just follow that advice, I'd see a lot less problems," Abrams says.

"The problem is termite activity is not something that is always visible," he says. "It's very easy for them to say 'We didn't see any activity.'"

Extermination gone wrong

Make sure you hire properly licensed and insured exterminators. Otherwise, you could risk hiring someone who is inadequately trained to apply chemicals or a company that offers a warranty containing a disclaimer against water damage.

Abrams says most pest control companies have people fully trained in the application of chemicals. But when they don't, it can damage your home or your health.

If you hire a company and there's a disclaimer in the warranty that says that water will render the services ineffective, it could lead to disaster.

"Well, guess what! You can't have a termite problem unless there's moisture or water," Abrams says. "They need an environment that has [a] 98 percent humidity level. Usually, you'll see termites in areas of water."

Abrams recommends hiring a termite company that's been in business for 20 to 30 years, one that's family owned and operated rather than a franchise. He recommends asking a local university entomologist for a recommendation, but he warns against simply thumbing through the yellow pages for an exterminator.

Expect to pay a large fee upfront, then smaller fees on a set schedule. If you switch companies, Abrams says, you will have to repay the initial fee because the new company will want to guarantee its own work.

Don't try this at home

The pest management industry is a \$4.5 billion a year industry, according to the National Pest Management Association in Dunn Loring, Va. Of 100 million U.S. households surveyed in 1997, 74 million were using pesticides, reports the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington, D.C. The average household annually spent about \$20 on do-it-yourself pesticides.

A homeowner who tackles a termite problem on his own might find it costs more to buy the required specialized equipment than it would to hire an exterminator.

"Without a doubt, termites are the most costly pest," Kern says. They also cause expensive damage. The NPMA reports that Americans spend \$2 billion a year to repair termite damage.

A bad pest-control decision could mean you could wind up losing your home -- a much bigger problem than you started with.

How to find a pest control company

Ask someone you know for a reference.

Find out whether the company belongs to a national, and state or local pest control association?

Ask the company what the pest is, how the problem will be treated, how long it will take, and what results can be expected *before* they start the work.

Understand what is included in the guarantee.

Buy value, not price. Take a second look at any apparent bargains.

Ask your local Better Business Bureau if complaints have been filed against the company.

Source: [National Pest Management Association](#)

-- Posted: March 20, 2000

To prevent pests,
remove

Water sources

Food sources

Diseased plants

Tree prunings

Fallen fruit

Breeding sites

Source: [Federal Consumer Information Center](#)

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